

Madhabi: A Female Bildungsroman

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Abstract

As a literary phenomenon and genre, Bildungsroman has been extensively used as a literary term and a critical research method. This particularly applies to the current novel, Dr. Kamal's *Madhabi*, under study. Therefore, this paper is an attempt to critically analyze the novel translated from the original Meiteilon into English by R.K Birendra Singh. It explores the common themes of the genre Bildungsroman, specifically female Bildungsroman, such as the quest for identity, female character psyche, socio-cultural factors, female education, etc. in the novel, emphasizing Madhabi, one of the female characters and her 'bildung.'

Keywords: *Madhabi*; female bildungsroman; quest for identity; character analysis; female psyche.

Introduction

Bildungsroman, etymologically, is a term derived from the German words 'bildung' meaning 'education' and 'roman' meaning 'a novel.' As the words suggest bildungsroman novels are 'novels of education' or 'novels of development.' It is, therefore, inevitable to find traits of development in the psyche and morality of the protagonist as he or she passes through experiences ranging from whims and fancies of childhood through conflicts leading to the final 'self-acceptance' state of adulthood or maturity which German historian and psychologist Wilhelm Dilthy calls 'inwardness' and 'personality' in his *Poetry and Experience* (1906). Bildungsroman as a literary genre was first coined by philologist Karl Von Morgenstern in 1819 in a lecture called 'On the Nature of the Bildungsroman' where he wishes to capture "...The most beautiful aspects of modern European man's development and of the age that [is] coming to be" (Boes 647). However, it was not until the late nineteenth century that it was fully embraced

leading to its full-fledged development in the mid-twentieth century. Gradually gaining popularity in England and the United States, novels of its kind were produced in large numbers, typically narrating the journey and struggle of the protagonist to find meaning and purpose in life. This supposed journey also serves as an instrumental tool for the authorial comments on the contemporary social and political issues which is instrumental in their quest for identity and awakening.

Variations of the term such as **entwicklungsroman** (novels of development), **erziehungsroman** (novels of education), **kunstlerroman** (novels of artistic development), and **zeitroman** (development of an era along with personal Development) have been validated and taken definitive literary forms in literature. These ‘coming of age’ novels, as most critics would like to put it, emphasize a series of unfortunate events inevitable for the character’s growth such as internal conflicts and everyday crises. Although the narrative bears a standard pattern: introduction, conflict formation, and climax, the narrative typically ends with the protagonist’s culmination or a denouement that lays a distinct foundation for himself or herself amidst the drawbacks and challenges. It is most agreeable that a genre of this kind for the most part has been applied almost entirely to the male characters thus inviting the attention of feminist critics claiming to foster an “anxiety of authorship” in the words of Sandra and Susan Gubar.

Prominent male models to be mentioned are Huck in *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* where Huck as a white boy is torn between society’s attitude towards slavery and his moral sensibilities. Charles Dickens’s orphan boy Pip was also put under the test of conflicting values and ethics in mid-nineteenth-century materialistic England. Ralph Waldo Ellison’s ‘Invisible Man’ witnessed the social and intellectual complexities faced by a socially invisible man as an African-American in racist-driven twentieth-century America. Thus, owing to the emotional and physical hardships they were put under, they were able to reach a point of resolution and settlement. Other characters such as Hardy’s Michael Henchard and Lawrence’s Paul Morel could be analysed as Bildungsroman on the grounds of sexual politics. Finally, James Joyce’s Stephen Dedalus is a Künstlerroman, a variation of Bildungsroman that centers on the development of an artist where artistic maturity is attained through alienation and sacrifice.

A Eurocentric discourse of the genre and the problem it poses on postcolonial nations have been brought to light in Abhisek Upadhyay’s paper “Postcolonial Bildungsroman in India,” wherein he argues that a character’s *bildung* serves as a testament to the political turmoil fostered

by the spirit of nationalism and resistance. Although this genre has been identified with the *Bildung* of a white middle-class man in the European context, there is little room for doubt as to whether this genre has been customized and appropriated to meet the demands of the postcolonial milieu. R.K. Narayan, for instance, is accredited for bringing the genre to a different degree of relevancy as he employs his fictional town Malgudi to accommodate figures who are voices of social issues particular to the Indian context.

G.M.A Christy's "The Traits of Bildungsroman in the Select Novels of R.K. Narayan" extensively studies Narayan's characters such as Swami, Raju, Mr. Sampat, and Chandran. Narayan's debut novel *Swami and Friends* (1935) asserts the narrative of lives narrated by a ten-year-old boy caught in the nation's stirring political consciousness of self-rule. Raju's, one of the main characters, *Bildung* is achieved due to his precarious juggling between being a common man and a sadhu, while Chandran's coming of age or character development resulted largely from internal conflicts and delirious episodes like romantic relationships. It comes as no surprise that Rushdie's 'Booker of Bookers' award-winning novel *Midnight's Children* (1981) is considered one of the most influential works as far as the Bildungsroman genre is concerned. The novel relates Saleem's attempt to find himself in a young nation resonating with Bakhtin's ideas of a true bildungsroman i.e., one "that presents a young man who represents a changing society" (Bakhtin 10). This paper, thus, proposes to delve into the subject and nature of this genre which, according to Tobias Boes, is the most problematic entry in the lexicon of literary studies with special reference to a female character Madhabi, and her '*Bildung*' while taking into account dominant motifs and themes of the genre.

Female Bildungsroman

Undeniably, some bildungsroman novels uncover female protagonists such as Bronte's Jane Eyre set in the Victorian society of class and gender roles. Ibsen's Nora can also, from a feminist stance, be considered as one as the play ends with Nora walking out of everything she was accustomed to because the affection and motherly labels she gained from her husband were not 'self-sustaining'. Sylvia Plath's *Bell Jar*, although not in the traditional sense of the term, can be considered to be one as Esther Greenwood undergoes her disturbing psychological journey and the readers are left to decide about her final state of mental instability. Nonetheless, feminist critics view the Bildungsroman genre with suspicion for several sensible reasons. Annis Pratt, in

Archetypal Patterns in Women's Fiction, declares that society provides women with models of 'growing down' instead of 'growing up' as opposed to the counterpart male models of the genre (Pratt 14).

Besides the limited number of female protagonists in the list or traditional generic categories for that matter, there have also been arguments as to whether these women fulfill the typical characteristics of the genre such as education, social conflicts, and maturity provided by age. Feminist critics think that the genre is male-dominated and male-centred and therefore, 'growing' women need not be rated and weighed solely on the traditional bildungsroman scale which was strictly androcentric. For instance, education which is supposed to be an important factor for growth cannot always be applied to women as formal education to date is a basic requirement women have no access to. Adding to this, the phrase 'coming-of-age' is also highly controversial because, unlike the male protagonists who have 'grown' through experiences and circumstances brought about by their age, women protagonists' growth may not necessarily be the same. In most cases and most agreeable, the latter grows out of the emotional conflicts and in their search to find their self-worth and purpose as an independent being.

Indian women authors, beyond the shadow of a doubt, have been articulating nuanced experiences and social concerns through their writings that fashion larger-than-life characters. Taking into this perspective, the Booker Prize winner *The God of Small Things* (1997) by Arundhati Roy, is acclaimed for its exhaustive portrayal of the role of childhood in a person's 'Bildung' as seen in Rahel and Estha. *Cracking India* (1991), by Bapsi Sidhwa, narrates a series of experiences in an undivided India torn by religious ideology as the protagonist Lenny undergoes her journey of self-discovery and denouement. Anita Desai's *Clear Light of Day* (1980) and *Where Shall We Go This Summer* (1975) projects the troubled affairs and internal turmoil that shape the female characters Bim, Tara, and also Sita, as they are engulfed in the ebb and flow of life in postcolonial India. Shashi Deshpande's *The Dark Holds No Terror* (1980) is also one notable Bildungsroman text as the novel entails the influence of traumatic experiences of childhood that impede a woman's ability to fair through the challenges of life. It exhibits the conventions of a female Bildungsroman and presents, through the protagonist Saru, the inevitable distortion in the female psyche due to abuse and negligence. A similar trend is most notable in *A Terrible Matriarchy* (2007) by Easterine Kire, a renowned female author from Northeast India. Kire skillfully weaves the tapestry of Delieno's life molded by her arduous

childhood experiences of alienation. Delieno belongs to a typical Naga familial setting, wherein the supposed matriarch Vibano is also sinned against by the societal system rather than committing the sin of perpetrating oppressive patriarchal values by herself. It can be fathomed and accepted that Delieno's reconciliation with her grandmother Vibano is the final act of maturation. Another work titled *Mari* (2010) by the same author recounts the heartrending story of a young girl and her gradual development to maturity in a war-torn Naga community during WWII. Likewise, celebrated authors from the region including Temsula Ao, Mamang Dai, Mitra Phukan, and Sudra M Rai, have done extensive work which can be read as the Bildungsroman narrative of a coming of age through conflicts, internal and external, by placing their subaltern characters in a society largely dominated by patriarchal values.

Needless to say, *Madhabi*, the first Manipuri novel, has been celebrated for its beautiful portrayal of sacrifice, an ethos quintessential to Manipuri society. However, the character of Madhabi and her growth has been overlooked in almost all critical readings to date. Even though Madhabi, as a character in the storyline, appears only a couple of times with few pages dedicated to her, she, nonetheless, can be seen as the embodiment of the main themes of the novel such as love and sacrifice. Therefore, the need for an in-depth study of her psychological development arises and her peculiar journey to maturity, as seen in the novel, secures her a position in the domain of the female bildungsroman. This study, hence, is a germinal attempt to structure the gradual unfolding of a female character through her resistance to expectations, and her search for meaning and purpose in life.

Manipuri Literature in the twentieth century was an age of experimentation and exploration with the staging of the first Manipuri historical play *Nara Singh* (1925) by Ibungohal and the publication of the first novel *Madhabi* in 1930 which was later translated into English in 1974 by R.K Birendra Singh. *Madhabi*, which can be classified as one of the neglected literary works of the North-East, falls into the category of female bildungsroman. It is written by Dr. Lamabam Kamal, a pioneer poet, who besides Hijam Anganghal and Ashangbam Minaketan in the early twentieth century, is credited with shaping the canon of Manipuri Literature. *Madhabi* is eponymously named after the female protagonist, who at the end of the novel, has been developed into the epitome of universal love and sacrifice. *Madhabi* in its simplest form is a story of unfulfilled love while offering a panoramic view of the transitioning Manipuri society in the early 20th century. The two major characters Madhabi and Uriri are named after flowers

symbolizing their vulnerability and fragility in a societal structure that inculcates values generated by patriarchy. The potential lovers of the two heroines are Birendra and Dhirendra Singh who belong to the more privileged section of the society, unlike their counterparts who were oppressed and subjected at different levels. The two pairs meet in the second chapter titled “Hillside Bower” and we can instantly witness the unruly nature of love as Biren begs Urirei to ‘untie’ him (*Madhabi*, 10). Separated by a till-date practice of sending youths ‘outside’ to pursue their career lest their education come to an abrupt end, a series of events followed including Urirei’s ill fate, ultimately ending in an ‘happily-ever-after’ celebration of the union in the last chapter “Strange Marriage”. As for Dhirendra and Madhabi, the love they seek to nurture is watered by doubts and uncertainty and thus never blooms. Madhabi’s character is provocative and unconventional and although she appeared in the novel only a few times, she is nonetheless important and her noble growth should be brought to the fore.

***Madhabi* as a Female Bildungsroman**

This paper will dedicate itself to identifying unquestionable traits that are hallmarks of an individual’s ‘Bildung’ while being mindful of the larger institutions that come into play. Typically, the bildungsroman characters grow out of conflicts between their inner voice and failed social expectations. The major conflict in the novel is the emotional conflicts brought about by romantic relationships. Madhabi first appeared in the hillside bower of Kanchipur with Urirei. As they gather flowers for the approaching pilgrimage to Nongmaijing Hill, she tells Urirei:

Dear Urirei, I have dedicated my heart and soul to someone, I am not, therefore, at liberty to move about freely.... (*Madhabi* 11)

Madhabi, here, appears to be no different from another conventional woman of her time who would readily sacrifice her freedom for love. A woman in the conservative society of the early nineties had very little say and participation in the social structure, not to mention making life decisions of their own. However, the next episode of her appearance unravels her unconventional nature as she refuses to acknowledge her true feelings and denies her lover a definite reply. This can be seen as Madhabi’s refusal to succumb to the degenerative position of a subjective woman of her age and time. The symbolism in the chapter “Dhirendra Singh’s Puzzle” where Madhabi is spotted with the ‘jewel’ (Dhirendra Singh) of her heart on a boat amidst the blooming lotuses,

illuminates further (*Madhabi* 40). Dhirendra Singh demands a definite reply to her feelings and even threatens to ignore her if she denies him the same. Here, Madhabi tells him of her distrust in the hearts of young men who are often enchanted by the sight of a beautiful face. Despite his relentless effort she subsides her feelings and promises him a definite reply in the next birth. Soon after, she jumps into the water and leaves him puzzled and disappointed. Thus, his love-lorn heart receives dejection and a clear sign of unfulfilled love is to be witnessed later on as the story progresses. This particular scene is also an allusion to the Manipuri epic poem “Khambha-Thoibi Sheireng” by the bard of Samurou—the story of two young lovers who faced the wrath and vengeance of God of love because they put their love and loyalty to a test. Madhabi combats the values and ethics of society thus bringing in conflicts between her inner self and the larger (socio-political) structure. These inner and outer conflicts, and how she navigates through them, amount to her ‘*Bildung*.’

It is befitting to say that Bildungsroman novels are narratives of a quest for identity or self-discovery. On defining a female bildungsroman, Labovitz rightly declares that ‘*Bildung*’ takes a greater toll from the heroine in that she embarks upon a quest for self-discovery, of discovering things she has known but cannot yet act upon” (150). Madhabi is a character who opens her journey of self-discovery in an environment that offers little nourishment to a dissenter. It is in her quest that she unravels the meaning of life and a sense of fulfillment. Conforming to the institutions does not cater to her more than worldly needs. She, therefore, resorts to alienation and rejection as is evident in ‘change in Madhabi’s mind,’ when she decides to alienate herself from the bigger structure to the gorges of Heibok Hill with a greater cause:

To be born in this world and to live contentedly with good food and beautiful clothes is significant. What is essential is to be able to help others. (*Madhabi* 77)

It is in this search that she attains her *Bildung* of uncontested sense of morality and humanity earning herself a symbol for sacrifice, a theme dear to the author himself in the words of E. Nilakanta Singh: “Madhabi represents the symbol of sacrifice, a theme dear to the author: a remarkable feat on the part of a village girl” (Intro to *Madhabi*). She is an antithesis of Urirei who represents ‘the traditionally accepted form of love’ marked by a happy union and often induced with prospects of institutions like marriage and family. Madhabi rejects human love or romantic love as she finds them selfish and restricting thus offering an alternate perspective on the meaning and purpose of life. Madhabi’s refusal to conform to the fixed gender roles that

await her if she accepts and acknowledges her feelings is what distinguishes her as a different village girl or anyone for that matter. After Dhiren left for his further studies, she also pursued her journey of attaining the perfect example of selflessness by saving a distressed woman like Urirei who suffers at the hands of villains like Bhubonchandra. She fashions plain clothes and with her disheveled hair and uncanny appearance, she seems to have metamorphosed into the ‘Heibok’ goddess as she presented herself to save the abducted Urirei. In her search for an answer to the unknown, she ends up shaping her distinct identity. Her journey, however, is misunderstood by the villagers denying her ‘natural’ place as a woman.

Formal education is another factor that brings the gender perspective into question. Elizabeth Abel, et al, in “The Voyage In: Fictions of Female Development” (1983) give a response to the unaccommodating nature of the genre as far as the female protagonist is concerned. They argue that “...even the broadest definitions of the bildungsroman presuppose a range of social options available only to men” (Abel et al. 7). These authors demand a broader definition of the genre that fails to examine a prominent factor such as formal education which has been for so long exclusive to men. Although, Manipur witnessed the first girls’ school in the valley in 1899 under British rule (Devi 2017). Madhabi is introduced as a simple and wayward village girl with no mention of her schooling or education nor any travel to develop her career while the heroes Dhiren and Biren were sent away from home to the cities for a better prospect. They, as a result, encounter no difficulty in orienting themselves even after years of absence. Instead, they avail themselves of a warm reception after earning their educational degrees and marriage awaits them. A factor such as education fails to shed more light on Madhabi’s *Bildung*. However, it draws one’s attention to the existing flawed social structure of the time that offers little support for women like Madhabi.

In the ‘epilogue’ of the novel, Madhabi is seen making a garland with tears in her eyes. As she is lamenting over the fact that she will not be able to put the garland on the desired neck, Dhiren approaches her. She can be seen in all her fully realized non-conforming ascetic appearance. This is the culminating point on her path to moral and psychological or almost spiritual growth because she is put to a final test. Despite the comfortable and easier life with her much-awaited lover at hand, she refuses to give in as it would mean sinning against the young girl to whom Dhiren is betrothed. The greater cause of humanity, however, stems from her refusal to ‘objectify’ what true love is. She refuses to confine her notion of love to a single

object, namely Dhiren, and instead, she chooses not to limit her ideals of love by devoting her life to helping the poor and needy. She chooses to ignore her worldly desires and ends their short encounter with these last words:

It is not in this world for her to give a definite reply; let her wait for that world in which there is no separation. (*Madhabi* 126)

Madhabi's final words can be interpreted in many ways. This cold gesture might spring from a pool of disappointment with mortal love subjected to changes and circumstances but her refusal to disclose her identity which is a possible gateway to fulfillment for a woman of no education and few prospects would mean turning the fate of another young girl who is betrothed to Dhiren. She, therefore, resorts to sacrifice and give all with dedication to her call of helping people in need. Madhabi yearns to attain the unattainable in her worldly existence and she sees the world around her from a transcendental point of view. She hopes to reach a different world where she would be able to put her kind of love into practice. It is for certain that romantic love posits itself deeply but she wishes to attain a transcendental and higher form of love marked by a higher truth and virtue that is sacrifice.

Conclusion

Madhabi, as a noble character, transcends all worldly desires and emotional gratification provided by the romantic love of Dhirendra, who belongs to the opposite gender, for whom she believes, "Love sprang not from the heart but from the eyes". It can be said that she has outgrown the socially conceptualized gender relations and constrictions of society. Her character invokes the universal human condition or desire for fulfilment which she executes in her way. A feminist reading on *Madhabi* will also authenticate her journey as a woman ahead of her time and society. Her psycho-social development and the socio-political condition of the time offer much scope for further study. *Madhabi* as a female bildungsroman, besides having a universal appeal brought into perspective by themes such as love and sacrifice, is an exploration into the conventions of the contemporary Manipuri society whereby only a dauntless woman like Madhabi can undertake the tedious journey or a spiritual quest almost as in the case of Margaret Atwood's unnamed protagonist in *Surfacing* (1972). Like any other female protagonist of her

kind, Madhabi passes through a stage of introspection and achieves her ‘Bildung’ which is, of course, not without sacrifice and selfless temperament.

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